DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 337 046 FL 019 792

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TITLE Homage to China's Nationalities by a Linguist and Educator.
PUB DATE Oct 88
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at Symposium 1988: Contemporary China (Montreal, Quebec, Canada, October 14-15, 1988).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Chinese Culture; *Cultural Pluralism; *Cultural Traits; Culture Contact; *Ethnic Groups; Foreign Countries
IDENTIFIERS *China

ABSTRACT

China's multicultural wealth, especially its minor nationalities, is described with focus on three ethnic groups: the Miao, the Naxi, and the Salar. Information is based on the author's experiences while teaching and traveling in China from 1986 to 1988. China's population is reviewed in terms of population, religion, and languages, and many personal anecdotes are recounted. (LB)

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Homage to China's Nationalities by a Linguist and Educator

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Symposium 1988: Contemporary China,
University of Montreal,
October 14-15, 1988

I want to sketch for you a picture of China's multicultural wealth, especially its minor nationalities. In order to make it as colorful and real as possible, I will limit myself to three ethnic groups: the Miao, the Naxi and the Salar. I got to know them while teaching and traveling in China from 1986 to 1988.

First, let me give you a few facts about China's population, religion and languages. We will include the Han, the major nationality of China, as a point of reference.

Population: As you know, China is the world's most populous country. The population is now over one billion two hundred million, according to the latest census (1990) about one quarter of the world's people. Slightly over ninety three percent (93%) of this total, or at least 1, 116,000,000 people, are Han. The remaining population, about seven percent (7%), divides into fifty six minor nationalities (roughly three and a half times the population of Canada).

The *MIAO* is one of the larger minor nationalities totaling more than 5,000,000;

The *NAXI* account for 245,000;

The *SALAR*, one of the smaller groups, count 69,000.

Religion: Now a bit about religion. The Han were originally Buddhist and Taoist. Today these religions are still practiced in remote areas or in farming areas far from the big cities.

The minor nationalities however still are, at least to some extent, Buddhist, Taoist, Muslim or Shamanistic in their beliefs.

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The *MIAO*: Among the Miao of today, Buddhistic and Shamanistic beliefs remain, as well as some traces of Christianity.

The *NAXI*: if at all religious, they follow a Tibetan type of Buddhism of the Dongba religion. Dongba is an ancient shamanistic religion that preceeded Buddhism in China and originated in the Bon religion of Tibet.

The *SALAR*: They are on the whole practicing Muslims. In fact, their national costumes, worn by most of them every day, are an expression of their traditional belief.

Language: Of course my main interest, as a linguist, is in language. Therefore what now follows is a quick overview about the spoken and written form of the Han first, still as point of reference, then the Miao, Naxi and Salar.

The *HAN*: The national language of China is Mandarin, a Sinetic language, specifically Puthonghua from Beijing, now the spoken standard for the whole of China. Across the country, however, the Han speak a number of different dialects or languages. There are at least eight (8) major linguistic groupings among them, Mandarin, Cantonese, Wu, to name a few.

As you know, when it comes to writing, the traditional Chinese characters used in China today have been simplified. The process started in the fifties. At the same time a phonetically-based writing system by the name of pinyin was introduced, using Roman letters. Thus attempts were made through this phonetic system called pinyin to popularize the spoken standard dialect of Beijing, Puthonghua. Nowadays, all Han children learn to read and write in pinyin first; then they are introduced to traditional Chinese characters. Without doubt, this magical pinyin system has successfully met the challenge of making communications possible in multilingual China.

The *MIAO*: Now returning to the nationalities, this particular linguistic group belongs to the Miao-yao family and comprises perhaps four major dialects. Scientists do not entirely agree about their classification. Miao is one of

China's minority languages that has been greatly studied. Each of its major dialects has a phonetically-based writing system. Presently, efforts are being made to establish a uniform system or writing. The difficulty of this task becomes clear when you realize that Miao has nine tones whereas Cantonese has at least six and Mandarin only four.

In respect to the distribution of the Miao, one may find them spread in clusters across Southwest China, half of them in Guizhou province.

The *NAXI*: If we continue along the Jinsha River in Yunnan Province, we drift into Naxi land. This area has two major dialects spoken, mainly east and west of the river, dialects so different that, surprisingly enough, communication is not possible. These Naxi dialects belong to the Tibeto-Burman family.

However the Naxi have a very ancient system of pictographic writing, containing at least 4,000 symbols. These have been passed down in the Dongba Sacred Writings and are still in use for religious purposes. Yet a modern phonetically-based writing system has been introduced here also.

The *SALAR*: This small group, belonging to the Turkish family, has been in close contact with Tibetans, Han and Hui. Salar's numerous borrowings from these peoples have enriched its vocabulary. Yet basically, the language of the Salar reflects their Turkish roots. One theory holds that over 2,000 years ago in Samarkand, a western outpost on the Silk Road, the Salar travelled east into China for trading. During Genghis Khan's reign many Salar settled in the eastern part of the Qinghai province, where today we find 90% of them living in the Salar Autonomous county at the border of Gansu.

There still is no writing system for the Salar. In general they use Chinese characters. Nevertheless, you will see them using Arabic in certain cases, as for example, when printing religious texts or announcing Muslim restaurants.

I had the honor of being employed as professor by the Central Institute of Nationalities in Beijing from 1986 to 1987. My students were already experienced English teachers. They had come from the four corners of China to perfect their knowledge of English, English teaching methods, and the cultures of English-speaking peoples. I had twenty students. They came from seven different provinces, spoke ten different languages and represented eleven different nationalities. Of course all of them were multilingual. All in all, they represented this ethnic mosaic that is modern China. I have chosen to depict three of them, the Miao, Naxi and Salar. You will notice colorful contrasts within each of these ethnic groups as we move from one student to another first in class and then at home.

The Miao. I remind you that there are over 5,000,000 Miao living in different areas in the southwest of China. They comprise one of the largest minorities.

May I explain here that the student I will present to you was given an English name in the beginning of the year in order to simplify life for his foreign teacher. He was called David, the rest of his classmates also received English names.

David was short and bright. He was one of my best students, a real wizard. Whenever I lectured, he was all eyes and ears, absorbing everything. He rarely took notes. His power of concentration and his excellent memory provided him with the necessary tools. After class, in his dorm, he would jot down the essential points made during class. Even the presence of his four roommates would not distract him. He rarely spoke in class but his written work revealed that he lived an intense inner life. He was a born writer. I was told that he wrote poems and essays in Chinese during his free time.

During the Spring Festival, I had the privilege of visiting David's hometown. His parents live in an area of rolling green hills, framed by gentle rounded mountains, in southeastern Guizhou. It was a misty morning, typical of this mountainous climate, as we drove into their sleepy hamlet, still drowsy, awakening to the Chinese New Year, recuperating from the previous night's festivities. It just happened that the first person I met in the deserted mainstreet was David's father, peacefully smoking his pipe. Soon David

appeared and with him an ever increasing number of family members and neighbors. They wore colorful Miao outfits decorated with some of the embroideries for which they are famous. Its was the Chinese New Year, they had all noticeably freshened up for the occasion, "Spring Festival" being another name for Chinese New Year.

It was easy to find David's house, if one read Chinese. In bold characters it was written on white strips of paper flanking the door that their eldest son was studying in Beijing. I was overwhelmed by their warm hospitality. As a guest of honor, I was invited to sit among the family elders. I did not understand the language they all used. It was their local Miao dialect. David's father, mother and grandmother spoke only their mother tongue. One of David's uncles spoke, read and wrote some Chinese. However, David's brothers, the members of a new generation, now study Chinese at school.

At one point, an unobtrusive woman over 80 years old, David's grandmother, broke into a song. David's mother joined her, then the men, so that even after she stopped singing, happy drinking songs filled the house. This grandmother was very special. She could sing ballads for three days on end without repeating herself. She now tries to pass on to her grandchildren her knowledge through her songs. (Here we are encountering oral literature at its best). This is the most effective traditional way of preserving a people's age-old knowledge and wisdom. David and his family are guarding the treasures of Miao culture.

During my visit, the neighbors joined in, proudly showing their skills: young boys racing horses without saddles and spearing fish in the river. One family came out, one of their three daughters wearing a heavy silver headdress covered with flowers of silver and a fringe of silver bells dangling around her face. All of them wore heavy silver necklaces and belts ornamented with silver bells, and richly embroidered blouses.

When I left David's home, his grandmother and his mother sang a song in my honor which they ad-libbed. His mother's final words to me still ring in my ears: "You are like my sister". David added: "Because both of you are my teachers". The village accompanied me to the train station.

The train started to roll. Sad and elated at the same time, I waved goodbye to my new kin. I still can see the gently rounded mountains and their dwellers, the Miao.

The Naxi: Another student in my class belonged to the Naxi ethnic group, approximately 252.000 people living mostly in the mountainous region near Tibet. I called her Helen. Her language belongs to the Tibetan-Burmese family.
Helen had much more difficulty in following the classes than David. This was probably due to her limited educational background. She was however a very hard-working, conscientious student and very often showed leadership in activities outside of class - a true offspring of a matriarchal culture. She ended her studies remarkably well, compared to where she started academically at the beginning of the year.

I visited Helen during the mid-term holidays after the Spring Festival.

The bus climbed unceasingly, over pass after pass for several hours. Suddenly, there it was, the Jade Dragon itself, a unique snow-covered mountain overlooking the high plateau. At its fool lies the ancient town of Lijiang with its surrounding villages. As Helen's guest I became the guest of the whole Naxi Autonomous County.

I should like to mention here that my hosts spoke English fluently. One of them was a famous Naxi herbal doctor who had been an English and botanical student of the late Doctor J. Rock, a Western scientist. I had the honor of signing my name in his international guest book.

The second person Helen introduced me to had written on big pages his own poetry translated into English. He had also acquired his English from the late Dr. Rock. I was thus extremely impressed by these open-minded people.

Finally, there was an older English teacher who had been educated by English-speaking missionaries and subsequently had studied music with professionals from Yale University in Kunming, Yunnan province. During my visit, he told me about some of his publications on the origin of Naxi music. Later on, he organized a meeting with all the English teachers of Lijiang at which I was asked to talk on bilingual education among the native peoples of Canada. I told them, among other things, that the Cree and Mohawk now teach some of the primary classes in their own native languages. They, in turn, informed me about an interesting fact I had previously ignored. Two primary classes are now completely taught in Naxi, using a modern phonetically-based writing system. I felt the exchange to be most fruitful.

Let us now visit with the Naxi speaking community. Helen introduced me to a group of researchers who are involved in studies that would broaden their knowledge and understanding of their own roots. They are sponsored by the government. Helen's cousin got the key for the newly erected museum where I had the unique chance to see ancient Naxi relgious documents. Up to that point, Helen had been unfamiliar with her people's highly developed past, such as its pictographic writing system and its lore. For the first time in her life she permitted herself to look more closely at her own culture, allowing herself to fathom unsuspected values about her own people.

Helen outdid herself indeed. Although everyone was on holiday, she planned a meeting with her school principal. The latter's response was above expectation. A car picked us up and took us sightseeing out in the country, ending at Helen's Middle School No 7 where a banquet had been prepared in my honor. Among the middle schools in and around Lijiang, Helen's is a residential school exclusively for Naxi students, about 600 from all over the county, who come together to study.

Hospitality is one of the main characteristics of Asian cultures. For travelers this feature spans like a bridge the ocean of ethnic plurality. In the home of Helen's parents, a few hours away from Lijiang, behind the Jade Dragon, only Naxi was spoken. Yet the linguistic barriers were of no consequence since Helen used her skills as interpreter. I felt much warmth and total acceptance, an experience similar to the one in David's home. Another visit, a new people, new kinship, this time at the foot of the Jade Dragon mountain.

The Salar: This group, with its 69,000 members, is considerably smaller than the miao or the Naxi. Their language belongs to the Turkish family. They occupy a mountanous area in the eastern Quinghai province on the border of Gansu province, known as Salar Autonomous County.

Of my twenty students, seven were of Muslim background. One of them, the only Salar student, wanted to be called Hark. In class he appeared intelligent and did what was required of him, but not more. Yet he was always busy outside of class, assisting those who called upon him. Though only 24 years of age he acted like a father, counselor and friend to his former students studying in Beijing. It was easy for me to forgive him, when he was occasionally sleepy in class, because, in general, he participated willingly in all the diverse class activities.

Last summer, I had a rare invitation to visit Hark's school and village. The first part of my trip consisted of an official visit to Hark's residential middle school where he was employed as a teacher of English. The car of the Ministry of Education brought us along a gorge-like valley where rocky mountains, not very high and sparsely covered with trees, dropped abruptly into the river. As the valley opened up, we soon found ourselves in a small town where Hark's school was located. In spite of the summer vacation, we were expected and escorted by school authorities through an unending garden surrounding the school complex. Before entering the school proper, we were offered a tour through the garden, where we tasted peaches, apples and melons. This land is leased out by the school to a caretaker. Students were not

present, but I was introduced to teachers who had their residence there and some officials. I noticed that Hark was truly appreciated as a colleague and as a teacher. From letters I have received lately, I have learned that his English classes (14 hours a week) average between 50 and 70 students and that he gives his students extra time after class, if necessary. By the way, English is now taught in middle schools everywhere in China.

Next there was a brief introduction to his own folks in his village. How different the sight was this time! At the foot of rusty colored sugar-loaf peaks nestled the hamlet, its flat-roofed houses concealed behind a screen of poplars. Small fields followed the slope down to a shallow river.

We entered the village by foot on the rugged path and were greeted by groups of men and young women intrigued by our arrival. The men wore their traditional white cotton flat caps and the women, elegant veil-like hair scarfs. The men stared at us boldly while the girls glanced at us shyly. As we made our way up the small alley toward Hark's courtyard, children appeared from all sides, watching, giggling, following as in a procession up to Hark's entrance but not further.

Hark's wife is a Muslim Tibetan from the neighboring village. They conversed together in Tibetan and Salar. The news of my arrival spread quickly. Soon her whole family arrived to have a close look at the Western professor. My tape recorder was not appreciated by the Tibetans and I respected their feelings. The ambiance was lively indeed. Some women were eating their meal in one of the adjacent rooms. They were helping Hark's family to harvest their wheat. I recorded their conversation in Salar without any difficulty. All of them were illiterate, yet bright and full of expression. In another room the older people as well as the youngest of the house enjoyed a specially prepared meal with their guest. They ate, chatted and joked a bit. One of their remarks was translated to me: "She doesn't look like a professor". I felt accepted. Hark's three year-old daughter, without shyness, sat proudly next to me during the meal. She is her father's pride. Later on, he pointed out to me his village's primary school, attended by about a hundred boys. He remarked:

"My girl is going to be the first female to attend this school." A new generation. A bold step into the unknown.

I visited more than half of my twenty students, representatives of many nationalities. Each and every one was vibrant within his or her unique culture. Nonetheless, they truly reflect the basic traits of humanity across modern China.

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